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DE RUEHLB #0795/01 1501524  
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2094  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2424  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2724  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000795

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [UNSC](#) [EAIR](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH PM DECISION ACCEPTED, SAAD HARIRI  
LOOKS TO 2009 ELECTIONS

REF: A. BEIRUT 765  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 788  
[1](#)C. BEIRUT 786  
[1](#)D. BEIRUT 773

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Majority leader Saad Hariri appears to have accepted March 14's nomination of Fouad Siniora as prime minister, but expects lengthy and difficult negotiations over cabinet formation. Focusing now on winning the 2009 parliamentary elections, Saad suggested several ways the U.S. could help, including Israeli withdrawal from Shebaa farms, U.S. assistance in rehabilitating the Kleyate airport in the north, a waste disposal project in the south, and, as always, Cobra attack helicopters for the Lebanese Armed Forces. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) CDA Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with majority leader Saad Hariri at his office in Qoreitem on May 28, just as Prime Minister-designate Fouad Siniora was making his acceptance speech live on TV. Hariri advisors Ghattas Khoury and Nader Hariri and notetaker Nadine Chehab also attended the meeting.

[1](#)3. (C) Hariri, smiling and smoking a cigar, appeared as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders following March 14's decision to name Siniora as prime minister (vice Saad) in the next cabinet. Referring to Congressman Issa's comment during CODEL Rahall's meeting with him (Ref A), in which Issa stressed the need for continuity in the premiership, Saad smiled, saying, "I would prefer continuity." Khoury recommended that the USG not congratulate Siniora publicly, as "he has been burned by the U.S. before." He called polstaff the next day to again stress that the U.S. should avoid referring to the "Siniora government" and instead focus its congratulations on President Sleiman and his government (a sentiment we also heard May 29 from March 14 leaders Amine Gemayel and Nayla Mouawad).

CABINET FORMATION  
WILL TAKE WEEKS  
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[1](#)4. (C) Prior to Saad's entrance, Khoury said that President

Sleiman's choice for prime minister had been Hariri. Khoury expressed no concerns about negotiating with President Michel Sleiman over cabinet portfolios, saying Sleiman had no "fixed idea." If Sleiman wanted the Ministry of Interior for his own candidate, however, he would have a problem keeping Elias Murr on as Defense Minister, Khoury noted, suggesting that Murr was the President's choice for this position. Khoury saw the blank votes cast by Hizballah and Amal (septel) during their consultations with Sleiman on the premiership as an indication they were willing to cooperate as well, but were setting themselves up to demand more concessions by not challenging March 14's choice for prime minister.

¶5. (C) Nader Hariri warned that determining who gets which portfolios will be difficult. "Every Tom, Dick and Harry wants a ministry," he complained. Nader, noting that independent Shia activist Abdullah Bitar had seen Saad earlier in the day, said March 14 should include an independent Shia among its cabinet positions. Khoury agreed, but said that while March 14 would choose a "decent" Shia candidate, the opposition's choice for a balancing Sunni candidate would be "crap."

¶6. (C) Saad suddenly remembered he had forgotten to return a call to Tripoli MP and Minister of Transportation Mohamad Safadi. Asked about Tripoli dynamics, Saad said it was not true that Safadi had voted against Siniora; this was a rumor spread by Aoun's bloc, he claimed. To reinforce this point, Saad then spoke with Safadi by phone, switching to English for the benefit of his guests, and telling Safadi, "You did the right thing today" (by voting for Siniora).

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¶7. (C) Noting that Siniora would begin binding consultations with parliamentary blocs on May 30, the Charge asked how long it would take to form a cabinet. Khoury predicted "some weeks," and Saad, joining in on the conversation, quipped, "some months." In 2005, under then President Emile Lahoud, it took 20 days, he noted, and that was going "full steam ahead." He later added that the opposition was not in any hurry to form a cabinet.

WHEN DO WE GET SHEBAA?

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¶8. (C) Changing the subject abruptly, Saad asked, "When are we going to get Shebaa?" The return of Shebaa farms would be a visible signal of support to the GOL, he argued, and undermine Hizballah's pretext for war. Why won't the Israelis turn it over to the UN? he asked. Instead, they are conducting "tomfoolery" over the release of prisoners, which they should have done through the UN.

¶9. (C) Israel is just helping Hizballah, Saad complained, predicting that Samir Kantar, the longest held prisoner, would be released shortly before the 2009 parliamentary elections, further boosting Hizballah's credibility. Khoury said cynically that every time Hizballah faces a crises, Israeli PM Olmert steps in to save him. And when Olmert is in trouble, Hizballah does the same for him, Saad added wryly. He added that USG comments that Hizballah was losing support also backfired against March 14.

WELCOMING VISIBLE  
U.S. ASSISTANCE  
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¶10. (C) The Charge said the U.S. was looking at other possible ways to assist Lebanon which had been raised by the March 14 leaders, such as rehabilitating the Kleyate airport in northern Lebanon. Saad noted that there had been an earlier plan to do so, at an approximate cost of \$50 million.

¶11. (C) Khoury agreed that "expedited" U.S. assistance (a

jibe at U.S. military assistance for the Lebanese Armed Forces, which Saad continuously complains is too slow) would be welcome. Kleyate airport would create 4,000 jobs, he said, adding that for March 14 to win the 2009 elections, it needed to focus on development and job creation, projects with lasting value, he stressed. We already are losing Jezzine (Christian enclave in the Shia south) and Zgharta (Minister Mouawad's constituency, where she faces still competition from opposition Christian leader Suleiman Franjeh), Khoury said, and we need to do something for Druze leader Walid Jumblatt in the Baabda-Aley district. The U.S. must do something dramatic, he said; something visible, Saad stressed.

¶12. (C) The Charge agreed, noting that the U.S. already had providing substantial support via Paris III assistance. Referring to her May 26 visit to Sidon, where she met with Nader's mother (and Saad's aunt) Bahia Hariri (Ref D), she asked whether the U.S. could help in this region. Ghattas cited Sidon's problem with garbage disposal as a possibility.

FOREVER COBRAS  
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¶13. (C) Saad downplayed the suggestion slightly, noting that the real problem in the Sidon area was political. Speaker Nabih Berri, who controlled much of the surrounding land, refused to allow residual waste to be dumped on his property. Saad also noted that a project like a waste treatment plant, though visible, was relatively inexpensive and something March 14 could take on itself. What we really need from you are Cobra attack helicopters for the Lebanese Armed Forces, he said.

COMMENT  
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¶14. (C) We expected to find Saad in the same defeatist mode in which he appeared during our most recent meetings, including with CODEL Rahall. On the contrary, he indeed seemed as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders now that the decision on who will be prime minister has been resolved. Perhaps he was only putting on a good face, but we are relieved that he now seems to have his priorities in order, e.g., facing the battle ahead for the 2009 elections. End comment.

SISON